

Design principles for post-PELA discipline-specific language programs

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In this paper, we present and illustrate four principles used to develop discipline-specific academic language tutorials for students who enter university with low levels of academic language proficiency. The tutorials are part of a university-wide language support program following a post enrolment language assessment (PELA). The principles respond to recent arguments about the importance of post-PELA language support being integrated into the overall university curriculum, being directly relevant to students' needs, and being discipline and context specific. Drawing on sociocultural theories of language learning, we outline each principle and then illustrate them with practical frameworks and activities used in academic language development tutorials at a university in Australia. We also provide a discipline-specific language development tutorial plan that incorporates all four principles. These principles will be of interest to practitioners both in English Language Intensive Courses for Overseas Students (ELICOS) centres and in university language programs planning discipline-specific language development activities.

Key words: Academic language; design principles of discipline-specific language programs; post enrolment language assessment; materials design

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Introduction

There have been recent calls for higher education providers, particularly those in English-speaking countries, to make academic language development central to student learning (Bond, 2020; Humphreys, 2022). Despite university language entry requirements, some L2 users of English (both international and domestic student cohorts) enter universities with levels of language proficiency that are too low to meet the linguistic demands of their courses (Murray, 2016). There is also increasing recognition of the need to decentralise English language provision and to develop language in the context of the various academic disciplines, because disciplines have different requirements around language (Green, 2016; Murray, 2016). However, using

the case study of Australia, Humphreys (2022) argues that few providers have so far addressed these issues in practical terms. Considerable institutional support and resources are needed to make academic language development central to student learning. Even more importantly, academic language practitioners designing language development programs need practical illustrations of how relevant theories can be translated into curriculum and materials development, and very few practical illustrations exist (Roose & Newell, 2020).

Several of the English Australia Special Interest Groups (SIGs) have a particular interest in academic language and in providing or co-creating such practical illustrations for the Australian context, including the Post-entry English and Academic Language (PEAL) SIG and the Direct Entry Programs (DEP) SIG. For example, in a recent PEAL SIG pre-conference workshop, Humphreys, Olston, Smith and Skrbis (2022) outlined some fundamental principles for developing an adjunct (one-off, optional) workshop based on a request from a university academic who identified that many students often struggle with a specific assessment task. In mapping out the consultation and design process for such a workshop, Humphreys et al. highlight that “discipline content should drive post-entry materials development; i.e. language is the vehicle of the content, not the driver” (slide 7). Our paper complements this workshop and other activities organised by the PEAL SIG by showing how theories can be directly translated into practice for the design of a series of compulsory post-PELA language tutorials.

In this paper, we present and illustrate four principles used to develop discipline-specific academic language tutorials for students who enter university with low levels of academic language proficiency. These principles are: (1) design in academic language development throughout degrees; (2) embed academic language development into discipline, subject, and assessment-specific practices; (3) build language self-confidence, academic identities, and a sense of community; and (4) use tools for autonomous language learning and goal setting. The principles underpin a university-wide academic language development (ALD) program we have developed at our university in Australia to ensure that all students can meet the language and literacy demands of their subject areas (Edwards et al., 2021). The ALD program consists of: a compulsory academic language screening task for all students; follow-up and compulsory discipline-specific language development tutorials for students who do not meet requirements (15 hours over a semester); and ongoing explicit assessment of students’ language within existing discipline assessments (see Edwards et al., 2021 for further details).

This paper focuses on how we have designed the tutorials by putting four principles for academic language development into practice. The design principles will have

practical implications for a range of ELICOS and university language educators, particularly teachers and designers on foundation or direct entry programs and those working in post-entry language support programs. Before discussing the principles, we outline the PELA context in Australia, the theoretical framework upon which our principles are based, and the research design that has provided evidence for our practice.

PELA context in Australia

The post-enrolment language assessment (PELA) context in Australia has an extensive history, with a wide range of types of screening tasks and applications. PELAs can take the form of in-house written diagnostic tasks for specific cohorts, faculty-wide screening tasks, or third party PELAs such as DELNA (Read, 2015), DELA (Elder & Knoch, 2009) or the MASUS (Bonnano & Jones, 2007). For a more detailed study of this topic, see Veitch and Johnson (2022). This diversity can also be seen in the follow-up to PELA approaches adopted by different Australian universities, which in turn is linked to the overall language policy of the specific institution (Harper, 2013; Veitch & Johnson, 2022). The interest in PELAs, their implementation and follow-up can be gauged by the popularity of regular workshops, forums, special interest groups (e.g., the English Australia PEAL SIG) in the ELICOS and Academic Language and Learning sectors. However, as noted by Edwards and colleagues (2021), despite this interest, and the fact that “many universities have implemented a language screening task, few universities have succeeded in ensuring that all students complete the PELA, nor in establishing a program that adheres to what best helps students learn the language required in their disciplinary area” (p. 56). The ALD program we have established at our university ensures that all students complete an online PELA and attend compulsory follow-up language support (Edwards et al., 2021; Goldsmith et al., 2022); here, we focus on how we designed tutorials that best help students learn the language required in their disciplinary area.

Theoretical framework for the principles

Our paper draws on sociocultural theories of language learning and illustrates their application to practice: specifically, academic writing as a situated social practice (Green, 2016; Lillis, 2002), genre discourse (Halliday & Martin, 1993), and a holistic view of language learning that incorporates affective aspects (Douglas Fir Group, 2016). Sociocultural theories view language learning as an on-going, dynamic process that is shaped by the unity of cognition and emotion, embedded in and mediated by the sociohistorical contexts of language use (Lantolf & Swain, 2019). For example, the design of academic writing as a situated social practice has been developed by researchers in academic literacies (Green, 2016; Lillis, 2002). This model emphasises the practices of writing in addition to the texts produced by writing. The activities in

this approach, such as the “talk around texts” (Lillis, 2002, p.82), “help new students to explore their disciplinary and institutional academic context” (Green, 2016, p.103). Both academic literacies (Green, 2016; Lillis, 2002) and systemic functional linguistics (e.g. Halliday & Martin, 1993) have informed our principles, as they incorporate both a genre discourse and a social practices discourse. Both of these approaches focus on writing as a practice that is socio-culturally and historically motivated and oriented.

Genre theory is anchored in the understanding that writing consists of text types which are shaped by social, cultural, and situational contexts. A hallmark of the use of genre theory in academic literacies is the explicit teaching of text types so that student writers learn the features and structures of different types of writing and can write appropriate texts for the discipline in which they are studying. If disciplinary literacy practices are contextualised, they can be seen as part of the developmental learning of students to become members of their academic and professional community.

A sociocultural perspective of language learning also pays particular attention to affective aspects of learning. As noted by the Douglas Fir Group (2016), “language learning is an emotionally driven process at multiple levels of experience” (p.36); therefore, an effective language development program needs to consider ways of building students’ self-confidence and identity. Our four principles draw on these theoretical underpinnings and attempt to ensure the holistic language development of students participating in the ALD program.

Research design

We conducted a large-scale evaluation of the ALD program across the years 2019-2021, drawing on a pragmatic and mixed-methods approach to explore the perceptions of various stakeholders in terms of:

- the impact of the ALD program on students’ language development and more broadly on the academics and faculties involved;
- the reasons why the language development tutorials were successful (or not); and
- how the language development tutorials could be improved.

To address these areas, we used multiple data collection methods including online student surveys in the first and last language tutorial of each semester, student focus groups at the end of each semester, and interviews with Associate Deans of Teaching and Learning (ADTLs) in each faculty. In total, we collected survey data from 1697 students and ran 28 focus groups with two to three students attending each one. The survey questions covered students’ perceptions of their academic language skills, confidence in using these skills, what they believed they had gained from attending

the language development tutorials, and their suggestions for improving the tutorials. The focus groups gave students the chance to expand on their survey responses and to discuss how and why they benefited (or not) from the tutorials. We also interviewed eight ADTLs and asked them about the impact of the ALD program in their faculty, as well as the challenges they have faced, and their suggestions for improvements.

For more details on the methods used to evaluate the impact on students who attended the language development tutorials, and for an analysis of the quantitative data we collected, please see Goldsmith et al. (2022). In the current paper, we draw on quotes from the qualitative data only (which included open-ended survey questions), since this data was the most useful in refining our design principles. The qualitative data was analysed inductively and thematically (see Braun & Clarke, 2006): several researchers in our team each identified key terms and quotes in the transcripts, after which we held several analysis discussion meetings to note categories and then sub-themes and themes.

Institutional ethical approval was granted for the study, and all participants provided informed consent for their participation. Through the understanding provided by our analysis of this data, we have applied, evaluated, and validated the four principles. The principles were developed and refined over the course of several years, and as such they emerged from our ongoing practice as well as the evaluation. In the next part of this paper, we outline the four principles, illustrate them with practical frameworks and activities used across several disciplines within our ALD program tutorials, and support them with quotes from the evaluation data.

Applying the principles

Principle 1: Design in academic language development throughout degrees

The first principle is that ALD is considered something that students will need to develop throughout their degree, and we need to help students sustain their motivation for language development. To ensure that students continue to develop their academic language practices throughout their degree, we use 'milestone assessment tasks', building on the Distributed Expertise Model developed by Arkoudis and Harris (2019). The Academic Language and Learning (ALL) team works with faculty staff in the disciplines to identify existing assessment tasks that are linguistically demanding, and that assess core disciplinary literacy practices. The chosen milestone tasks are usually at the end of the first and second semester of the first year of a degree and a third milestone task is in second year. Table 1 illustrates how the milestone tasks are embedded in the Bachelor of Science degree program.

Table 1.
Milestone tasks in Science

Milestone	1	2	3
Stage of degree	Year 1 Semester 1	Year 1 Semester 2	Year 2 Semester 1
Task	Critical reflection 500 words	Scientific report based on lab work	Expert witness report

The assessment tasks are marked by faculty staff according to the relevant assessment criteria. Faculty staff are also asked to explicitly mark for language, using a framework that we have designed to help them identify the level of language. The framework provides an overall descriptor of three levels of language which are applied to each discipline. Each level has further details relating to grammar, vocabulary, and paragraph structure (see Edwards et al. 2021 for the framework). We offer professional development to help staff use the framework. While there has been some pushback from individual subject coordinators due to perceptions of increased workload, overall there has been widespread acceptance. The majority of subject coordinators and tutors welcome the opportunity to build their capacity to evaluate assessment tasks for language as well as for content. The faculties decide the threshold for language levels that are acceptable for the relevant assessment task in each degree. Students who do not meet the threshold level are invited to attend intensive academic language workshops during university breaks.

We used data from the interviews with the Associate Deans Teaching and Learning (ADTLs) to evaluate the impact of milestone assessment tasks. Overall, ADTLs found the milestones useful for several reasons. ADTLs commented on how the inclusion of milestone assessments had helped staff to identify students who needed further language development, and to consider what level of language was acceptable at what point in their degree:

You always knew the [students] who were really desperate for help. It's probably brought more attention to the marginal cases, but I think it's also helped us recalibrate ... what actually is okay ... thinking about where should they be relative to their progress in the degree? (ADTL 1).

A further advantage of the milestone assessment tasks is that they provide faculty staff with a way of talking about language: “[The milestone tasks] help to create shared language around how to talk about language.” (ADTL 3).

Principle 2: Embed academic language development into discipline, subject, and assessment-specific practices

The second principle is that ALD is most successful when embedded in the discipline, subject, and assessment-specific discourse and genres of students' degrees; this

principle is anchored in the literature on embedding language development (e.g. Arkoudis & Doughney, 2014; Fenton-Smith et al., 2018; Wingate, 2015). This principle is implemented by introducing students to tools for understanding the discourses and norms of their chosen disciplines. We help students to unpack complex texts, analyse exemplars, unpack assessment questions and marking rubrics, understand discipline-specific readings, and learn discipline-specific terminology.

The activity in Table 2 illustrates one way in which the language tutorials help students to unpack assessment tasks in the Faculty of Health. Although academics often design assessment guidelines and detailed marking rubrics, students may not always engage with these documents in meaningful ways. If students understand the rubric, not only will they be better prepared to undertake the assessment, but they may be in a better position to use the rubric to make judgements about the quality of their work (Carless & Winstone, 2023) before submission.

A marking rubric from a current assessment task is used as a learning tool to help students understand assessment tasks, and to develop a framework for beginning their assessment. The rubric consists of descriptors for each criterion from fail to high distinction. Using the high distinction column, the descriptors can be turned into questions, as shown in Table 2.

Table 2.
Marking rubric for Health

Weighting	Criterion	High distinction	Questions
3%	Significance of the chosen health issues and impacts supported by evidence-based literature	Clear, concise and insightful description of the significance of the chosen health issue and the impacts on the individual, family and community for both the Indigenous and non-Indigenous population. Supporting literature is relevant and from a variety of sources. Referencing is correct.	1. What is the significance of the chosen health issue? -how big a problem is it? -how many people have that issue -is it the same in the Indigenous and non-Indigenous populations or are there differences? 2. What are the impacts on the individual, family, and community for the Indigenous population? 3. What are the impacts on the individual, family, and community for the non-Indigenous population? 4. What evidence have I found? How do I know the literature is relevant? What does a variety of sources mean? What sources are relevant and appropriate? What referencing system should I be using?

Students then spend time in groups turning the rest of the criterion descriptors into a list of questions, which can be used to help draft an outline for their assessments.

The benefits of this activity are that it: helps students focus on assessment requirements; ensures engagement with the rubric; checks students' understanding of the statements in the rubric; encourages them to unpack complex concepts; leads to discussions about how rubrics are used by academics, and how they can be used by students; and generates discussion amongst students around points of confusion. Focusing on the high distinction column and providing this kind of learning activity is an example of what Hammond (2006, p.269) refers to as "high challenge, high support". As the following statement illustrates, students find this activity helps them better prepare for assessments: "The most important thing that I ... learned is how to analyse the instruction of my assessment and ... what should I notice about marking a rubric" (Health focus group, 2020).

A second sample activity (see Table 3) is the use of exemplars to illustrate the structure of text types that are used within students' disciplines. In this example, students are guided to write an introduction to a literature review in engineering.

Table 3.
Guided example of literature review introduction

Writing the introduction (background information) for your literature review	
<p>It is important to provide your readers with some brief background information about your project topic, so that they can understand what you are investigating and why it needs to be investigated.</p> <p>The literature review template recommends including the following information in your introduction:</p>	<p><i>Introduce the general topic or field of the review, setting out any advancements and challenges of interest. Then introduce more fully the specific topic addressed in the review and state any main aim or objectives to be met. Say very briefly what is to come in the layout of the review. Note: the Introduction should include general references to back up the points made.</i></p>
<p>Read the following introduction and identify what information is included. Also identify the verb tenses that the authors use.</p>	<p>Notice what tense is being used in the different parts of the introduction.</p>
<p>1. Plastic waste is a serious global problem and many engineers have looked for ways to reuse or recycle this potentially valuable resource. Many researchers have investigated the combination of a variety of plastics with concrete (Gu & Ozbakkaloglu, 2016), especially when used in road construction. This review will examine the use of polymers in asphalt pavement.</p>	<p>In this study, a critical review on the history and benefits of using waste and virgin polymer in asphalt is presented, followed by a review of general studies on using polymers in asphalt in order to improve the properties of pavement.</p> <p>(Manju, R., Sathya S & Sheema K. (2017). <i>International Journal of ChemTech Research</i> 10(8), p. 804-811)</p>
<p>Now practise writing the first two or three sentences of the introduction to your literature review.</p>	
<p>1st sentence: subject and background 2nd sentence: stating the problem</p>	<p>2nd/3rd sentence: what is being done to address the problem by other researchers. 4th sentence: the main aim of your literature review.</p>

As shown in this example, students find that the use of exemplars improves their writing: “It has given a structure to write. I never knew how to write any academic paper, how to go with the flow” (Engineering student focus group, 2019).

Principle 3: Build language self-confidence, academic identities, and a sense of community

As noted earlier, the affective domain plays a significant role in language learning (Douglas Fir Group, 2016). Therefore, the third principle is that ALD can be promoted by building language self-confidence, academic identities, and a sense of community. This principle is enacted in the design and structure of the tutorials, where the emphasis is on co-constructing the general academic and disciplinary language required to succeed at university. By developing confidence in using the discourse of their respective disciplines, students can begin to construct their academic identities. The tutorials involve small groups of 10-15 students and aim to create a friendly and supportive environment to allow students to develop confidence and build connections with one another. The smaller size of the tutorials, along with the sense of most students being “in the same boat” encourages students to feel comfortable about participating in language activities. In our evaluation surveys, many students commented about “feeling comfortable” in the class, or about exchanging ideas with other students. They mentioned feeling comfortable talking to the tutors; being comfortable in general; and being comfortable with English.

The following tutorial activities promote a collaborative and safe environment in which to build confidence while developing academic language skills, noting that many activities have been adapted for remote teaching/learning environments:

- Ice breakers
- Breakout room activities such as think/pair share
- Practice in speaking and writing activities with peer and tutor feedback
- Discussion around what it means to be a nurse/midwife/architect/designer – what language is used in the profession and what students bring to the table
- Discussions either via audio, in the tutorial room or in Zoom/MS Teams chat, where students can express their ideas and ask or answer one another’s questions

Table 4 shows two examples of ice breaker activities used in the disciplines of design and architecture.

Table 4.
Icebreaker activities in design and architecture tutorials

Example 1: Special landscapes

Share either the view from your room/flat/house, or an image of your favourite landscape or building (students can either upload images to a Google document, Padlet, or simply share their screens). Describe the landscape/building using a wide range of architecture/design vocabulary and explain why this landscape/building has a special meaning for you.

Example 2: Guess the object

Work in pairs or small groups in breakout rooms, or as a whole class. Choose an object from your home – it can't be your phone or computer. You have 2 minutes to describe it in as much detail as you can without actually saying what it is.

Use these questions as prompts:

1. How big is it?
 2. What colour/s is it?
 3. What does it feel like (its texture)?
 4. What can you do with it (its affordances)?
 5. Where would you usually find it (its context)?
-

The following comments illustrate how students are building their confidence, connections, and sense of identity in the tutorials.

Then I met some international friends who very similar situation with me, so I met some good friends there ... was a huge benefit to me ... we're more close than my other courses, because we're all in the same boat, or had different struggles or the same struggles, why we're here to begin with (Engineering student focus group, 2019).

I feel like every time I speak, in the class, the tutor will send us encouragement and appreciate all [of us] talking (Business student focus group, 2019).

[The language tutorial] was a great opportunity for international students especially these days. We can talk with classmates and tutor not being afraid of mistakes in English (Student survey, 2021).

Principle 4: Use tools for autonomous language learning and goal setting

The fourth principle is that ALD can be supported by introducing students to tools for autonomous language learning and goal setting. We define autonomous language learning as learning that is self-directed and that develops students' own awareness of and motivation for improving their language skills (RocheCouste & Oliver, 2014). In their study of international students' learning strategies in Australia, RocheCouste and Oliver conclude that students need guidance and frameworks related to "how to improve your English" (p. 76, emphasis added), and they also need to be encouraged to practise, reflect on, and extend their language skills beyond the classroom in a

range of new contexts. As part of Fenton and colleagues' (2018) university-wide English language enhancement program in Australia, students are required to access one of the available university support services and then write about their experience in a reflective task. Like Fenton-Smith et al.'s program, our ALD program also integrates in-class with beyond-the-classroom learner autonomy. A key element of this integration involves supporting students in setting language goals (Edwards, 2013).

In the language tutorials, students are introduced to a concept we have developed called 'learning cycles', depicted in Figure 1. Guided carefully by tutors and working in small groups, students complete a cyclical process of setting a language goal (stage 1), selecting an activity that aligns with that goal (stage 2), collecting evidence to evaluate the success of their activity (stage 3), and then reflecting on this cycle (stage 4) before starting another cycle. Students are encouraged to set SMART goals, meaning that they need to be specific, measurable, attainable, relevant, and time-bound. An example is as follows:

I want to improve my knowledge of vocabulary used in the construction profession so that I can use around 20 new words in my final architecture critique presentation in week 12, and I can achieve this goal by focusing on 5 new words each week.

The way that learning cycles are established and managed differs between faculties, but typically students work through two cycles over a period of 10 weeks, and present on what they have learnt in their final tutorial.



Figure 1: The 'learning cycle' for language development

In conjunction with the learning cycles, we promote out-of-class learner autonomy by encouraging students to access free university resources and services: academic language support workshops, conversation groups and consultations, a buddy program, and online tools for checking grammar and features of writing. Students are encouraged to incorporate relevant activities within their learning cycles and reflect on how they can continue to access the resources and services throughout their degrees.

Our evaluation data shows that students initially found the learning cycles concept quite challenging, and they needed structured guidance from tutors, especially to set specific goals. As one student noted: “[setting language goals] is very useful... but I need [help with] this method of whole semester. That's hard but that's interesting. I will use it in the future.” (Business student focus group, 2020).

Over the course of the tutorials, most students gradually learnt how to make their goals specific so they could feel a sense of accomplishment: “[setting goals] was something about a specific small progress that you want to do so you were more focused on that ... so I found it a good idea.” (Law student focus group, 2020). Some students even described the learning cycles as the best part of the tutorials:

I think the best part of the learning cycle is that it provide very clear [target] you want to improve, language speaking, writing or vocabulary. Also, the activity you can do and the evidence you can acquired and the reflection you can make in order to help yourself. ... So probably [the learning cycle] is the best part of this language development [tutorial]. (Business student focus group, 2019).

Combining the principles in a language tutorial plan

Table 5 shows an example of how all four principles can be applied to a plan for a series of weekly academic language development tutorials for first-year architecture students. In the architecture discipline, students take a core ‘studio’ course of project-based design work that culminates in a major oral presentation, as well as a ‘history and theory’ course that requires students to read complex texts (books and journal articles) and write summaries and essays. This tutorial plan could easily be adapted for other disciplines.

Table 5.
Language tutorial plan for architecture

Week	Tutorial content			
	Subject/discipline-specific academic literacy tasks (Principle 2)	Links to assessments	Building confidence, identities, community (Principle 3)	Learning cycles (Principle 4)
3	Diagnostic writing task; reading architecture texts		Getting to know each other; introduction to LDTs; discussion of expectations and what it means to be an Architect	
4	Feedback on diagnostic writing		Ice-breaker activity; forming learning cycle groups with similar goals	Introduction to learning cycles concept
5	Reading architecture texts and writing summaries; building up architecture vocabulary		Ice-breaker activity; discussion about discourse used in architecture discipline	Groups plan learning cycle 1
6	Preparation and practice for first architecture presentation	Studio course assessment 1 (presentation)	Ice-breaker activity; safe space created for practice presentations and constructive peer feedback	Groups provide updates on activities
7	Architecture writing skills: paragraph structure; sharing paragraphs for feedback	History & Theory course assessment 1 (reading journal)	Ice-breaker activity; encouragement of peer feedback on writing	Groups reflect on learning cycle 1
Semester break				
8	Skills for active listening to architecture lectures		Ice-breaker activity; discussion about motivations and principles in architecture	Groups plan learning cycle 2
9	Preparation and practice for second architecture presentation		Ice-breaker activity	Groups provide updates on activities
10	Architecture writing skills: paraphrasing and referencing review	Studio course assessment 2 (presentation)	Ice-breaker activity; discussion about academic integrity in architecture discipline	Groups reflect on learning cycle 2

Week	Tutorial content		
11	Architecture writing skills: design statements and essays; peer review of current written drafts	Ice-breaker activity; constructive peer feedback on writing	Groups prepare presentations
12	History & Theory course assessment 2 (essay): Milestone task 1 (Principle 1)	Celebratory environment for sharing of learning experiences through presentations	Presentations on learning cycles

CONCLUSION

In this paper, we have provided several practical illustrations of how sociocultural theories of language learning can be implemented to develop university students' academic language within disciplines. The four principles discussed are particularly useful for those working in post-entry language development programs, either with or without a formal PELA, or for practitioners who are teaching in pre-sessional and direct entry EAP programs. Principles three and four, however, could usefully be applied by academic language practitioners and ELICOS teachers in almost any context.

These principles, however, can be best applied when the provided language development is discipline specific, or at least when students are explicitly guided to apply the language practices to their discipline area. Applying the full set of principles and especially principles one (design in academic language development throughout degrees) and two (embed academic language development into discipline, subject, and assessment-specific practices) would require institutional leaders to view language as central to students' disciplinary learning and provide relevant resources. The ALD program we have implemented in Australia has benefited from support and funding from the head of the university's teaching and learning division, a team of experienced academic language practitioners who each have discipline-specific expertise and well-developed relationships with faculty academics, and a project management team who manage student logistics (Edwards et al., 2021). Therefore, we strongly encourage higher education providers to consider how academic language development principles, resources, and strategies could be appropriated to ensure that all students, and especially those with low levels of academic language proficiency, are supported to continuously develop their language as a core part of their university study.

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